

What Adventists Can Learn From the Play *The Book of Mormon* | BY RON REECE

Book, music and lyrics by Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone. Directed by Casey Nicholaw and Trey Parker.

Every denomination should be so lucky to have the creators of *South Park* write a play about them. The cleanest-cut audience I had ever seen at a Manhattan play, many a Mormon had come to check out this year's Broadway hit *The Book of Mormon*. There was much for the Mormon and non-Mormon audience to laugh about, wince about, reflect

upon, and cheer about. Two young Mormon men sitting next to me—looking like they just played hooky from a mission trip—exclaimed between themselves the worthiness of the play's nine Tony awards.

The play revolves around Elder Price and Elder Cunningham, two young Mormon men beginning their two-year missionary stint dressed in white shirts and



Andrew Rannells, center, and Josh Gad, right, play missionaries to Africa in 'The Book of Mormon.'

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nametags. Elder Price, preppy, clean-cut and recently graduated with high marks in Mormon history and doctrine, is teamed up with frumpy, plump, and doctrinally-challenged Elder Cunningham. Elder Price sings of his desire to go to Orlando, Florida, the home of Disneyland. Elder Cunningham sings of his desire just to have a friend, and is happy to go anywhere with Elder Price. Ironically, they end up in war-torn Uganda, where previous Mormon mission teams had yet to convert a soul.

In Uganda, real-life Africa meets white Mormonism. How do religion and God confront tribal civil wars, genocide, poverty, famine, female circumcision, and men with AIDS who believe that sleeping with virgin baby girls will bring a cure? Not very well; the Ugandans, in anger and desperation, sing of God's abandonment. Against all odds, bumbling Elder Cunningham strikes a sympathetic chord in the heart of Nabulungi, a young African woman who wants to know more about Mormonism. Elder Price, overwhelmed by Uganda, packs his bag and heads off to the airport to fly home.

With courage and a wild imagination, which would have pleased Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, Elder Cunningham presents the Mormon gospel with an embellishment or two or three or four. Cunningham tells of Joseph Smith receiving the Book of Mormon from the Angel Moroni, who had come down from the Starship Enterprise. Cunningham creatively finds verses in the Book of Mormon condemning female genital mutilation and other verses embracing blacks. Cunningham pulls out all the stops, bringing in Yoda, the Jedi Knights, Darth Vader, and Frodo from *The Lord of the Rings* to enliven the "dry and boring" Book of Mormon. It works; the tribe is converted. Meanwhile, Elder Price finds his courage but is kidnapped by local African warlords. Elder Price's copy of the Book of Mormon has to be extracted by the local proctologist.

The play ends with a play-within-a-play. The Ugandan tribe performs a play depicting

the Book of Mormon—Elder Cunningham's version—to the visiting Mormon hierarchy that has come to greet their first Ugandan converts. All of Cunningham's characters and embellishments are added, including Mormons' strong inducements for fertility and large families—African style. The Mormon leadership is not happy, but they have their first converts. Peace and order come to the village, female mutilation stops, as "the clitoris" is seen as a gift from God, and the tribe now goes door to door—Mormon style—to convert more Africans to Mormonism. Through it all, faith, hope and grace work their way into the lives of these Ugandans, even when the vessels of God's service are flawed, doctrinally topsyturvy and self-centered.

Although distinctly different in doctrine and theology, Seventh-day Adventists and Mormons share similarities. Both denominations emerged from upstate New York in the mid-1800s—a location not lost on the Manhattan crowd. Like Mormonism, Adventism came into existence with a shaky start with its failure to accurately predict the second coming of Christ in 1844. The Book of Mormon was brought into existence when the Angel Moroni suggested that golden books be dug up by Joseph Smith from a local hill; unfortunately, those golden books were secreted away by Moroni before anyone could carefully examine or copy them. The Adventist sanctuary doctrine, causing much controversy and later the expulsion of many a committed Adventist pastor and teacher, was inspired by an isolated cornfield vision of Millerite farmer Hiram Edson.

Both Mormons and Seventh-day Adventists suffer from the sin of denominationalism: namely, giving their denominations, prophets, and doctrines near-divine and unquestioning status. Sin at its core is idolatry or placing false gods before God. And the closer a thing, idea, or person is to God—i.e. religion, religious doctrine, a denominational prophet, or authority figure—the greater the temptation that these

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good religious things or people will be substituted for God. Not surprisingly, God's first three commandments warn against idolatry.

A prophet in our time is Timothy Keller. Founder of Redeemer Presbyterian Church located several blocks from the Manhattan theatre district, Keller has written three prescient books for our modern age: *The Reason for God*, *Counterfeit Gods* and *The Prodigal God*. In *The Prodigal God* both older and younger sons are alienated from the father. The younger son is alienated by choosing a life of immorality and debauchery. The older son, although living at home with his father, is equally alienated from the father because of the father's self-righteousness, rigid doctrinal conformity, and moral piety. Both sons are lost.

The younger brother ultimately sees the error of his ways and returns to the father's extravagant, unmerited grace and embrace. The parable sadly ends with the sullen and angry older brother refusing to enter the party—a party of the “fatted calf,” and “music and dancing” meant by the father for both the older and younger brothers' enjoyment (Luke 15:23–25). Humility is in, pride is out. Mormons and Adventists need to avoid the spiritual pride of the older brother.

If the *South Park* directors were to write about Adventists, there would be much to cheer about, wince about, laugh about, and reflect upon. Our health message would not be ignored. Adventists' recent insistence on a literal six-day creation week might lose its exclusive luster in a medley of alternative Genesis 1 interpretations. Our sanctuary doctrine might be reworked into a colorful choreographed routine where every human is depicted as a temple or sanctuary of the Holy Spirit. The Three Tenors—the Apostle Paul, St. Augustine and Thomas à Kempis—could sing “Why is Spiritual Formation a Sin?” The prophetess Ellen G. White might even lead a chorus line of Adventist female seminarians singing “Ordain and Testify.”

Adventists are not without a sense of

humor. At the annual meeting of *Spectrum* at Asilomar in 2009, Pacific Union College's Dramatic Arts Society presented a collage of skits and songs entitled “This Adventist Life.” A healthy smile comes to mind when I reflect upon “Clean: Remembering a Friday Afternoon” or “Salsa, What if the Second Coming is a Dance?” or the Heretic Singers giving a witty rendition of “1844.” *Red Books*, another play produced by Pacific Union College's DAS, similarly presented a refreshing and balanced look at the “human” Ellen G. White. Laughter and humor can lower defenses while illuminating false worship centered on cherished idols.

Not for the faint at heart, the play *The Book of Mormon* at times was raw and irreverent, at times it brought tears to my eyes in pure laughter, and at times it brought anxiety, knowing God's infinite love for the world in Jesus Christ is presented by imperfect humans and institutions. The Book of Mormon is a modern-day parable, from which other denominations could benefit by temporarily inserting their story for self-inspection. The Mormon Church's official response reveals an encouraging direction in Mormonism: “[While] the production may attempt to entertain audiences for an evening, the Book of Mormon as a volume of scripture will change people's lives forever by bringing them closer to Jesus.”

If life is a cosmic play on a cosmic stage, surrounded and supported by God, a successful play will have the self-sacrificing love of Jesus at the center of one's life, family, denomination, doctrines, and culture. ■

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